COMMENTARY

By: **CRAIG WASHINGTON, *Program Coordinator - AID Atlanta***

This is dedicated to Ulester V. Douglas Co-Director of Men Stopping Violence and my friend; and Venus Landin, a beloved woman who was killed by someone she loved.

"I'm so mad at you, I could hit you," he said. His unblinking stare targeted the center of my eye. He was serious. He wanted me to know he was dead serious. A mixture of fear and disgust filled my belly. I wanted to vomit and run. "Yeah well you better not try!, " I replied feeling like a helpless manchild cornered and scared. Taking some "manly" stance to save face. I could not let him see how terrified I felt and so I mustered up some anger.

He left the room and I don't remember what happened after that. I really don't recall anything that happened before that either. Only the moment. I know we had words, as they say. We'd been living together for about a year and a half and we'd argued before then. I've forgotten most of the arguments. But I will never forget the sudden wildness in his eyes in that moment. The rage uncoiled and clamped his face into a fist trembling with nervous anger. I looked into those eyes and saw animal calculation. I think he was contemplating not if he was going to hit me but how...what part of my body to strike...how hard! In the glass of those eyes I saw a reflection I did not recognize. There was no semblance of me but rather a pest, something to be squashed to restore peace of mind. Oh yes I remember that fisted face very well. It is etched in blood memory. Like the antibodies we develop to store photo files of germs that invaded our bodies to kill us. I remembered that face because even though I talked myself out of "taking it too seriously" and even after we made up and made love, I knew with an unconscious knowing that I would see that face again. That this stranger would come back.

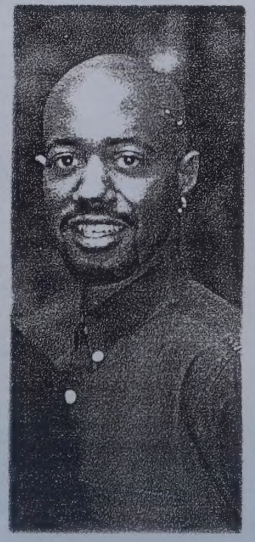
April 1994. Another disagreement. Loud. I leave out for work. He runs out behind me screaming "Turn my stereo off!" He chases me out into the parking lot. He catches me. There it is. It's like someone else took his face and put it on. He shoves me then returns to the apartment. "I'm not coming back!," I yell out. I head for the bus stop. His car speeds up and pulls onto the sidewalk in front of me. "You don't have to leave 'cause I'm going this time," he declares then peals off. The bus arrives. I hear the words spoken "It's something about me leaving!" The driver tries not to notice that I'm talking to no one he can see. I stayed with my friend Jafari for 2 weeks. I came back home.

Labor Day Weekend 1994. He and I had an argument earlier that day. I told him I was hanging with my friends Jafari and Lance and didn't want him there. Jafari was leaving to relocate to New York the next day. 5 friends, mostly his, had been staying with us for the holiday. They were all there at the house when it happened. I came in the house, said hello to everyone and went into the spare bedroom. He came in behind me and closed the door. "Where are you going?" he demanded. I knew it wasn't a question but I answered anyway. Mad thumps erupt inside my chest. I recognize the familiar stranger. He has returned to fulfill his promise. "No you're not," he said confidently and positioned himself between me and the door. I can still see his shoulder just above my left eye. I stepped forward against the tall block of him and he started swinging. One caught my left eyebrow and another got my lip. I fought back while backing away, wanting to escape but too afraid to run. Our friends rushed into the room and pulled us apart. As I yelled and cursed, Lance pulled me out of the house where I'd be safe. I called him the next morning and instructed him to leave my half of the rent on the kitchen counter and to not be there when I pick it up. I was not coming home to stay. He agreed. He sounded sad and contrite. When I arrive, one of his friends was sitting in our kitchen. He suggested that I leave the keys to the apartment since there is some concern that I might do something rash but kept my own place.

November 1994. He asks if we could get back together. He says he knows he was wrong and that we should get counseling. (He would later tell others the violence was mutual) I agreed to it. We tried to figure out how to regrow a relationship after the trust is too long gone. We never did. The second separation was final.

The hardest piece of this to acknowledge is that I went back into the relationship. There is still some shame about that. As I write I hear the voices of readers who ask, "What did he do to make his boyfriend 'lose control'?" or " If it was so bad why did he go back?" Many will not think to ask "Why did he choose to hit Craig?" or "What made him think it was cool to use a car as a blocking weapon?" If you should ever ask me either of the first 2 questions I will not answer because I don't think they are questions. They are statements of a certain point of view - the perspective that informs us it is normal (manly)for one man to hit another but not normal (unmanly) for a man to be hit by another. The bias that leads us to interrogate the victim like the way we hold raped and battered women somehow responsible for being brutalized.

Ask yourself if a friend who was physically and/or verbally abused by his/her partner would come to you for help. Do you honestly think s/he would expect you to respond without shaming (i.e., "Why would you take that?" "You must not love yourself!")? What evidence have you offered that would assure him/her of your empathy? What have you said when the tea was being poured about some battered brother who tried to play it off? Did you ask how could you help or did you just "tsk - tsk" and beg for more tea? I know people by name who still don't believe he did this to me. They look at him and say "not him". Maybe they think you have to represent "thug" to violate somebody. They will look at this true story as a dramatic flourish and flip the page. They will not see me, a manchild, as being victimized. They will not see. I wonder at what price have we sold our compassion to wear this cheap hand-me-down cloak of manhood which costs us so dear-



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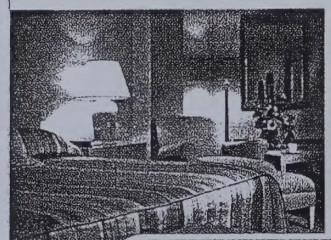

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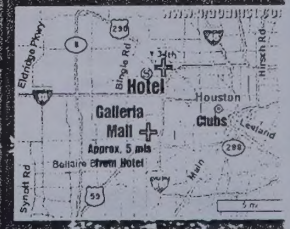

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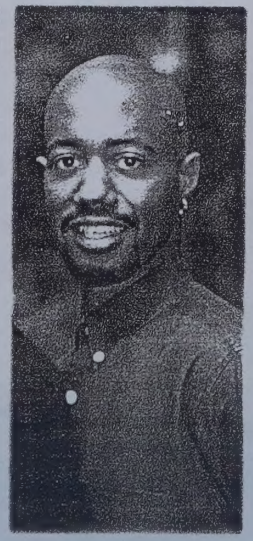

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